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ABSTRACT

School systems in the United States reflect its social system and changes. Societal trends that have affected educational institutions include declining enrollment, informed and politically active minority groups, accelerating inflation rates, the back to basics movement, and a general public mistrust. To survive, public education must define the roles of each level of governance (local, state, and federal) by determining the goals of each level and its responsibility toward meeting these goals. Educational plans developed at each level should be evaluated at the next level to guarantee performance. (CMJ)

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Policy Considerations
for
Education in the 1980's

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Submitted at the request
of the House of Representatives
Committee on Education and Labor
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and Vocational Education
The Honorable Carl D. Perkins, Chairman

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Policy Considerations for Education
in the 1980's

by I. C. Candoli

Introduction

The decade of the 1970's saw great change in the institution called education. For the first time in the history of the republic, the demographic data signalled a downturn in the numbers of clients to be served. This reality, in and of itself, caused considerable trauma for it implied a completely different policy parameter.

In addition, the parallel emergence of strong teacher organizations, politically active and informed minority groups, an aroused and demanding citizenry, and a constant and accelerating inflationary spiral merely served to exacerbate the situation. The turmoil gave birth and credence to a variety of protest movements directed at the institution, its programs, and at the rate of local tax support required for education. It also forced increased participation at both the state and federal levels in terms of financial and other support for local educational programs.

The purpose of this paper is not to evaluate the desirability and effectiveness of existing federal/state support but rather to develop policy implications for consideration by the congress as the debate about federal support continues. At issue is the survival of Public Education in the United States. Program technologies are and will be abundantly available. Whether these technologies will be made equitably and fairly available to all members of our society is a major issue to be addressed by the Congress.

The Educational Institution as a Mirror of Society

The school systems of the United States do reflect the social system that spawned them. Events of the past decade have produced changes in the Educational Institutions that are directly related to the societal changes that occurred. Examples of such response are very evident as one examines the recent operational decisions that have impacted the Public School systems of the country. Following are a few of the many examples that could be cited.

1. Expansion of E.S.E.A. and other federal programs. This enforces the concept of education being important to the "general welfare of the United States." Recent and continuing efforts to change the eligibility for participation in E.S.E.A. Title I reflect the shifting political power base from the city to the suburbs. While the move is presently a subtle one, the long range implications for citizens of the inner city are dramatic and somewhat frightening.
2. The "Back to Basics" movement. The furor created by the test score flap ignores several important realities, including the dramatically enlarged segment of the population actively engaged in the educational process. The pressure to more highly centralize educational decisions, to more rigidly standardize curricula, and to develop a national program of education has been immeasurably assisted by this movement.
3. The dramatic increase in educational expenditures as a result of substantial gains in the salary structure for educational personnel. The seemingly insatiable demands spewing forth from the organized cadre have spawned and nurtured "anti-school tax" groups and have encouraged attacks on the public school system.

4. The decline in the school age population and enrollment leading to a demographic reality that a majority of the American public have no direct affiliation with the public schools further reinforces the level of resistance to the public school system.
5. The perplexity of having an accelerating inflationary spiral, an increasing unemployment rate, and an economic recession proceeding at the same time further reinforces resistance to increases in public education expenditures.
6. Emerging legal decisions requiring increased state support for educational expenditures and the subsequent domino effect for increase in federal support also contribute to resistance to public education.
7. The manpower and educational needs of the country and the effect of these needs on the school programs are sources of concern to many.
8. The general mistrust and distrust of all institutions that grew to frightening proportions during the political machinations and systematic distortion of facts that took place during the early 1970's. Subsequent findings of continuing abuse by various agencies and institutions have maintained the public hostility toward government and toward existing institutions.
9. The increased bureaucratization and heightened centralization of most institutions as a reaction to the abuse of privilege and responsibility that had occurred has encouraged the isolation of decision makers from those who are effected by those decisions and has further tested the credibility of public institutions.

10. The difficult and traumatic consequences of implementing federal law, i.e. equity, due process, Brown, etc. has further alienated the citizenry from the public school institution.

These and other societal realities have had great impact on the public school systems of the United States. Demands, far out of proportion to the need, have complicated the existence of local school districts. The realization that the local school is fair game for those who wish to build a political power base has created pressures from competing political ideologies for control of the system(s).

The Problems of Institutional Credibility

Local school systems being, at the same time highly visible and among the most naive and powerless of the public institutions have suffered the pangs of the credibility gap as severely as any agency of government. Because of the political immaturity of the institution, the public school system has become the repository of blame for every ill that exists in these United States. Problems as diverse as the decline in basic achievement to the need for better utilization of school lunch programs are laid at the doorstep of the Local Education Agency. Concurrently, the power to make decisions that effect those concerns are deposited at the state and/or federal levels. The result is a hodge-podge of rules and regulations that serve to protect the beaurocracy while ignoring the needs of the client.

What have been the contributing causes to the existing credibility issue? Included are:

- a) The increasing complexity of American society. The urbanization of the country and the parallel move toward a contractual society have served to weaken those institutions that were predicated on familial or-

ganizational patterns. This pressure has encouraged the increase of bureaucratic structures needed to promulgate and administer the multitude of rules necessary to operate a society based on contractual relationships. Strict adherence to formal and written regulations precludes any great attention to individual differences and needs. To an organization that is intended to serve human needs, this is a distortion of purpose.

b) The technological revolution has burst upon our society without a parallel growth in human understanding and tolerance. The exact sciences have far outstripped the capacity of the social sciences to prepare members of the society to understand and appreciate the technological advances. Most public institutions, including education, are several decades behind the state of the art in terms of technological development and cannot respond to the increasing sophistication needed to remain relevant.

c) A realization on the part of Americans that there is a flaw in the previously unwritten law that "bigger is better". The powerful and sometimes irreversible force that has given birth to the awesomely strong and narrowly focused institutions of the United States has not permitted the realization of the American dream for all. Rather, the delicate balance of power needed to stabilize our society has given birth to big business and big labor organizations. In an effort to provide the stabilizing influence government has also become large and cumbersome. The rules and regulations spawned by this drive toward hugeness have served to enmesh all institutions with such a deluge of paper that America is in danger of sinking under the weight of the very forms generated to resolve its problems.

d) The strong and pervasive desire for control that has often blurred the purpose of a particular institution. The need that caused the birth and growth of the governance structures needed to organize and pro-

vide services for the citizens has somehow become skewed and virtually uncontrollable. While professional managers (bureaucrats) are necessary to the smooth flow of services, the prevailing and unchecked power of such structures ignores the original purpose for their creation. Such institutions, while originated to serve the public need, somehow became self-serving and work toward self-aggrandizement and increased power over the very persons they are designed to serve. The resulting loss of concern for the client (citizen) gives birth to the large and increasing credibility gap now being felt by public institutions in the United States.

Given the validity of the foregoing and the resulting force toward extreme centralization that has been manifested during the decade of the 1970's, what are some implications for public policy in terms of elementary/secondary education needs in the United States? Is it possible to provide a milieu in which the needs of a nation can be served by addressing the educational needs of individual citizens? Is it possible that a system of public education, developed and designed to serve individual needs, can also be held accountable to the goals and objectives of the state and nation? Can the trust relationships needed to permit such educational programming be developed and nurtured?

Attempts to resolve these and other related issues will provide the major focus for educational policy in the 1980's. It is the opinion of the writer that a serious attempt to address the centralization/de-centralization dichotomy with policy developed to encourage the decision-making power to be located at the point where students are served (the building) will enable a major resurgence in the effectiveness and importance of the educational institution.

Re-conceptualizing the Purpose of Education

Recognition of the general welfare importance of education and of the legal mandate for the various states to provide education for its citizens must be tempered with the reality of individual needs and desires. Survival of the democratic form of government is predicated on the strength inherent in diversity and not on creating everyone out of the same mold. Commitment to state and national goals is crucial but the mechanism for achieving those goals should and must be developed at the local level with local needs, strengths, resources and weaknesses giving birth to particular programs. The misconception that everything is alike in these United States is a terrible mistake and will lead to a self-defeating national curriculum. Student needs must have a major impact on local curriculum.

As an example, the Congress has repeatedly asserted that a literate, well informed, well educated citizenry is crucial to the general welfare of the United States. The Congress has also provided financial support to generate progress toward the National Goal of Literacy. Through the Office of Education, the Congress has requested State plans to meet this National Educational Goal. The State plans became the basis for allocation of resources to the various states and through the states to the various Local Education Agencies (L.E.A.). The concept is rational, well conceptualized and theoretically workable. The harsh reality, however, is that it largely ignores the level at which education takes place - the building level. Recognition of the importance of the building has belatedly come with the requirement that Title I Parent Advisory Groups be created at each building, but all too often these groups are merely rubber stamps for a centrally drafted program of education.

The realization that groups of students don't learn but that individual students do has somehow been ignored in the myriad of laws, rules, regulations, and interpretations that spew from the many tiers of governance that parents and students must face. This writer submits that only when parents, students, and staff work together to identify and meet local educational needs in an atmosphere of trust and mutual respect under the leadership of a caring and knowledgeable principal, will the individual learning needs of students be met. The local unit (building) must have the capacity to prioritize needs, to develop specific programs, to select appropriate materials, and to provide the necessary methodology to deliver the programs to the clients.

The Congress, through educational legislation, has established a number of National Educational Goals with Literacy being among them. The various states, in turn, have expanded State level educational goals to include not only the National Goals but other important educational considerations as well. These State Goals become the parameters under which local Boards of Education establish educational policy defining the local curriculum. Typically, curriculum requirements are established such that every school in a particular L.E.A. has its total program prescribed from a remote central office that has little or no appreciation for the particular situation existing in any building. Increasingly, these decisions are being subsumed at the state Department of Education Level and even beyond at the U.S. Office of Education level. Parenthetically, surveys done by pollsters and researchers show that the highest degree of public confidence and support for education rests at the building level and that the more removed from the building a decision is made, the more suspect it is.

It is important, in view of the tremendous impact possible via the educational process, to utilize the events of the past two decades as guides in the re-structuring of the educational system to capitalize upon the strengths as perceived by the people; while, at the same time, meeting the state and National Educational Goals. Very loudly and clearly, the message is that greater reliance, power, support, and resources must be placed at the building level with an accompanying general reduction in "top down" pronouncements, rules, regulations, and interference. The school house, as the point of contact between the educational system and the student, must become the focal point of decisions concerning program, student needs, educational planning, and distribution of scarce resources. All other level of the bureaucracy must perform support, monitoring, evaluation, and planning functions. The ultimate decision as far as program needs for the individual student is concerned, rests with the persons charged with the primary instructional responsibility - those staff members located at the school of attendance.

The Centralization/De-centralization Dichotomy

One of the dilemmas inherent in a rapidly changing society is the pressure for increased control and centralization that occurs. In the United States the transition from an agrarian to an industrial to technological society has been accompanied by expanded and multi-layered governance structures. As the services needed and provided grew; the rules, regulations, and regulatory bodies also grew. It is now time to carefully review and define which functions, roles, and duties are best performed at a highly centralized level and which functions, roles, programs, and services are best delivered in a de-centralized mode.

For example, in education those services and actions that lend themselves to routine and mechanized activity are most efficiently and effectively accomplished on a highly centralized basis. Such activities as payroll, purchasing, data processing, custodial and maintenance services, transportation, food services, warehousing, and similar tasks can be most cost effective if done on a very highly centralized basis. Most of the fore-mentioned tasks deal with materials and things rather than with the human variable. Mechanization and routinization lead to more effective use of resources and to lower unit costs thereby freeing a larger portion of a school budget to educational uses.

At the same time, those activities that directly impinge upon the individual student and deal with human needs and educational processes must be de-centralized to the level at which the student and the institution intersect. This, of course, is at the local building level where parents, students, teachers, and principal can cooperatively identify educational needs, develop program priorities, request and allocate resources, and develop an educational plan to resolve the major needs of the clientele. The capacity for such activity must be allocated to the building in order to place appropriate responsibility and accountability so vital to success.

As a response to those who will immediately raise the issue of "control" and of "accountability" for program success, the following model is presented. Given the existence of National Goals, State Goals, and Local Education Agency Goals and Policies; it is not too difficult to imagine these goals as concentric circles within which the local school and classroom operate. Each National, State, and Local Goal can be expressed as a product expectation for students. The building is charged with meeting these expectations. The de-centralized process is not intended to change legis-

latively developed goals and priorities but rather to allow the local unit the flexibility needed in order to develop appropriate processes that can accomplish the desired ends. For example, meeting the National, State, and L.E.A. goal of literacy would entail the development of a building delivery process that identifies the student needs, incorporates staff and community strengths, and requests appropriate support in order to meet the particular objective(s) in reading. It should not be of primary concern to L.E.A., State, and Federal Education officials what methodology, pedagogy, materials, or curriculum is utilized by the local unit. It does, however, matter a great deal that the specific goals and objectives be met with corresponding student growth. Rather than impose specific materials and techniques on a building, the persons at the district, state, and federal levels must assume the posture of "support" staff and assist the local staff in devising appropriate delivery systems that consider unique needs and situations. The urge to direct and control must be sublimated into a posture of genuine assistance and support. It is the opinion of the writer that efforts to accomplish the model suggested above will enable dramatic improvement in the educational attainments of Americans.

Implications for Federal Educational Policy

Efforts must be mounted to define roles at every level of educational governance. It is important that the U.S. Office of Education (or Dept. of Education) establish strong national expectations as an interpretation of Congressional policies. It is equally important that these national expectations (or goals) be viewed as the parameters within which the various states develop state objectives (expectations). In like manner, the various states must establish parameters for local districts and the L.E.A.'s for individual buildings. At each level, i.e. building, L.E.A., S.E.A., and U.S.O.E. plans must be developed that address:

1. The Goals provided by each level of governance, and
2. The responsibility of the particular level toward meeting the goals.

The building as the operational unit must deal primarily with process objectives, i.e. specific actions and activities directed toward L.E.A., S.E.A., and U.S.O.E. goals. Support activities from the L.E.A., S.E.A., and U.S.O.E. must be made available.

The educational plan developed at each level must be monitored (evaluated) at the next succeeding level to guarantee performance. Thus, the L.E.A. evaluates the building on the basis of the building plan; the S.E.A. evaluates the L.E.A. on the basis of the L.E.A. plan and the U.S.O.E. evaluates the S.E.A. on its plan. In this manner, each level has the flexibility to address unique and specific needs but must still move toward the accomplishment of specific goals that are provided to each level as minimal expectations.

The Congress, through P.L. 94-142, has already initiated a powerful force toward programming to meet individual student needs. Reinforcement of that concept by providing the necessary recognition of the building as the repository for the bulk of individual educational program (I.E.P.) activity and by supporting the concept of I.E.P. for all students will give tremendous assistance to the development of building level responsibility.

Extension of the mandate for parent advisory councils to all buildings along with a required local building plan as a vehicle for assessment will dramatically extend the responsibility held at the building level. Accompanying the above must be a de-centralized funding concept, i.e. program funds must be allocated directly to building units with the local unit determining the line item allocations.

The writer urges that, at the very least, a number of school systems be identified to participate in a demonstration effort. Further, that those isolated school systems already supporting the concept be among those selected for special assistance for a trial 5-year period.